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SUBJECT: RTG ADMITS DEATHS OF DETAINEES TAKEN AFTER
DEMONSTRATIONS IN NARATHIWAT

REF: BANGKOK 7391

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert Clarke. Reason: 1.4 (d)

1. (U) Summary: Late on October 26, Royal Thai Government (RTG) officials confirmed that 78 demonstrators (of over 1300 detainees) taken in custody after an October 25 clash with security units at Tak Bai Police Station in Narathiwat province died "in transit" to an army camp in Pattani. These deaths brought the death toll from Tak Bai incident to 84 when added to the six demonstrators killed by gunfire at the scene of the clash. According to the RTG report, about 80 percent of the 78 victims died of asphyxia and the remainder from convulsions. Photographs taken at the site in Narathiwat where the demonstrators were loaded onto army trucks show them being laid on the truck beds and apparently piled several stacks high on top of each other. Some Muslim and other observers have warned that the deaths of the detainees will lead to revenge and deepening violence in the South. On October 27, Thaksin announced to the Thai Senate that he will convene an inquiry into the death of the 78 Muslim protesters who were rounded up by police and military troops and crammed into trucks. One unsubstantiated account claims that some of the detainees died from beatings suffered en route to Pattani. End Summary.

RTG OFFICIALS' GRISLY REPORT ON TAK BAI INCIDENT AFTERMATH

2. (U) At a hastily arranged press conference in Pattani late on October 26, Dr. Pornthip Rojansunant, Deputy Director of the Justice Ministry's Central Institute of Forensic Science (and the country's most respected pathologist), Deputy Permanent Minister of Justice Manit Suthaporn and Major General Sinchai Nutsathit, Deputy Commander of the Fourth Army Region, announced that 78 detainees had died while being transported from Tak Bai Police Station in Narathiwat to Pattani, a distance of about 120 kilometers, the previous day. On the morning of October 27, in an interview with Thai Channel 11, Dr. Pornthip repeated her initial explanation of the causes of death by stating that cursory autopsies indicated that about "80 percent" of the 78 victims died of asphyxia or suffocation. The remaining 20 percent, she said, appeared to have died from "convulsions." Dr. Porthip also released frontal facial photos of the dead, which showed multiple bruises. She stated that many of the dead had twisted limbs and some had broken spines, indicating they were crushed by the overcrowded conditions.

3. (SBU) Porntip said she had not conducted an investigation of the trucks used (reported to be between 20 and 25 to transport 1300 detainees). Nor had she investigated the procedures of detention and transport employed by the Police and Army. However, pictures in the press taken from video footage show that the detainees, with their shirts removed and their hands tied behind them, had been piled face down in the trucks and stacked in layers of three. The military trucks are designed to transport approximately 20 individuals normally seated in two rows on either side of the flatbed trucks. During the press conference, officials did not state the time it took to transfer the detainees from Tak Bai to Camp Ingkhayyut Borihan in Pattani by this method during the evening of October 25. However, several sources indicate that the transit time was between 4-5 hours along a 4-lane highway for a trip that normally takes about 90 minutes.

THAKSIN ANNOUNCES INVESTIGATION

4. (U) Prime Minister Thaksin flew to Narathiwat on October 25 and praised the security forces for their actions in controlling the demonstration at the police station. He said that the government had "run out of patience against elements instigating violence. He added that security forces should forego the use of weapons in managing protests. He reportedly said the security units at Tak Bai had taken the correct step in firing their weapons in the air. "They did a great job. They have my praise." These comments were made before revelation of the detainee transport deaths. On October 26, on initially hearing of the additional 78 victims, he reportedly said, "It's about bodies make weak from fasting. Nobody hurt them." On October 27, Thaksin announced to the Thai Senate that he will convene an inquiry into the death of the 78 Muslim protesters who were rounded up by troops and crammed into trucks. Thaksin told the Senate that his government will set up a committee to

investigate why the detainees were apparently crowded into trucks until they couldn't breathe. Thaksin told the legislators that "We feel sorry. We tried to take care of them well. They should not have died. There will be a committee to investigate so that we can draw lessons from this."

15. (C) A visiting NGO representative who met with Thaksin on October 27 said that the Prime Minister had admitted that "mistakes" had been made in the joint police-military transport operation. He claimed that the phases that police had used to break up the demonstration (negotiations, then water hoses, and only then force) had been taken under his instructions. On October 27, MFA Americas Director General Nongnuth, echoing Thaksin's earlier reaction, told us that the security forces had not realized how weak the detainees were from fasting, and in addition had used the wrong type of tarpaulin, a less air-permeable type, to cover the transport trucks en route.

CONFUSION OVER ANNOUNCEMENT OF MASS DEATHS

16. (C) On October 27, Dr. Pornthip told the Embassy that the hastily arranged press conference on Tuesday, October 26 at C.S. Pattani Hotel was actually prepared for General Sirichai Tunyasiri, Director of the Southern Border Provinces Peace-Keeping Command (SBPPC) to give an official account of the event to the public. But Sirichai didn't show up at the scheduled time and, therefore, she and her superior, Deputy Permanent Secretary for Justice, Manit Suthaporn, and Fourth Army Deputy Commander Maj. Gen. Sinchai Nutsathit had to conduct the press conference themselves. A source in the Thai military told the Embassy that Prime Minister Thaksin wanted the medical team, not the military commander or the Director of SBPPC, to disclose this information to the public. Mr. Anusart Suwanmongkol, owner of the C.S. hotel, observed that it was the first time that this kind of press conference (normally held inside the nearby Ingkayutthaboriharn military camp) was staged at a private hotel.

17. (C) According to Dr. Pornthip, she examined the bodies of the detainees on Tuesday, October 26, at 8.00 a.m. at Pattani Provincial Hospital, confirmed the total number of 78 deaths (not including 6 killed at the scene of the demonstration), and had reached her conclusions about asphyxiation being the primary cause of death. She also told us that although all the bodies had bruising type wounds, there were no penetrative or gunshot type wounds. As in her public interview, she refused to comment on details surrounding the loading and transporting of the 1,300 arrested demonstrators or the conditions in the trucks. She maintained her version that she only came to the hospital to examine the bodies on the morning following the day of the incident. She stressed that what she found upon arriving at the hospital were just the dead bodies of 78 protesters and was thus not in a position to comment on any circumstantial evidence or other details.

18. (C) Poloff met October 27 with the news editor of the English-language daily, the Nation. She told him that one source had claimed that the first truckload of detainees, reportedly filled with those identified specifically as "trouble-makers," had arrived at the Ingkayutthaboriharn military camp with its passengers either dead or dying from beatings. This story has not been otherwise confirmed.

REACTIONS FROM MUSLIM AND HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS

19. (U) Muslim groups and human rights organizations in Thailand have reacted strongly to this tragedy. Abdullahman Abdulsomat, Chairman of Narathiwat provincial Islamic committee described the government actions at Tak Bai as "totally insane... Certainly, this will escalate further and who knows what will happen next." Nideh Waba, Chairman of a private religious schools association, reportedly warned that "Those militants... will fight back harshly with suicide attacks -- they (the government) have to kill thousands of us or hundreds of thousands of our brothers here to prevent us from standing up against this massacre. This is totally unacceptable and the prime minister must take direct responsibility for the consequences," Even more ominously the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO) published on its Thai language website a threat of revenge from the "Suicide Unit of Ramadan Sharif" for the incident and a threat against the Senior Muslim Representative in Thailand, the Chula Ratchamontri, if he makes any statements in support of the RTG's action at Tak Bai. The PULO website features photos of the incident, mainly featuring handcuffed young Muslim males lying on the ground at the Tak Bai site with Thai troops and police standing over them. Similar footage was shown for a few hours on government owned television stations on October 26.

110. (U) Thai National Human Rights Commissioner Jaran Ditthapichai told journalists October 27 that the Commission

will send a letter to PM Thaksin to express its strong concerns over the deaths and to demand that the government implement appropriate measures to solve the Southern problem carefully and peacefully.

11. (U) On October 27, local Thai NGOs circulated material from the HongKong-based Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) which charged that "this is another mass killing committed by Thai security forces in southern provinces. Before this event, the government's official figures showed that more than 400 people had been killed since this January. The AHRC is gravely concerned that the Thai authorities' repeated use of violence against civilians badly affects the rule of law in the country, and further encourages impunity of the police and soldiers to get involved in further violence." This statement was accompanied by an appeal to write PM Thaksin and other RTG ministers in protest.

ESCALATING TENSIONS

12. (C) Comment: PM Thaksin has now promised to investigate the deaths of the detainees, but he does not seem to be moving quickly enough--or sympathetically enough--to avert widespread Thai Muslim anger over the Tak Bai incident. Many observers fear that a lasting backlash is inevitable and will provoke further security clampdowns that generate further violence in the South. Some fear a watershed hardening of Muslim attitudes that will attract outside radical groups that have apparently not been involved in Southern violence to date. It remains to be seen how the majority of Thai non-Muslims will react, but many of our contacts have expressed shock at the tragedy and sympathy for fellow citizens who died after participating in a demonstration entirely within their constitutional rights. End Comment.

JOHNSON